

Testimony of  
Mr. George Biekkola  
Former Employee, Cleveland Cliff Iron  
L-Anse, Michigan  
Testimony Before the  
Health, Education, Labor & Pensions Committee  
United States Senate  
Hearing on  
Workplace Safety and Asbestos Contamination  
July 31, 2001

Senator Murray and members of the committee. My name is George Biekkola from L-Anse, Michigan. I'm 67 years old, and I have asbestosis. I began working for the Cleveland Cliff Iron Company in Michigan in 1964. After almost 30 years on the job, I had to retire early because of my disability.

I've got to tell you -- this isn't how I planned to spend my retirement. I'm married, I have four children, and five beautiful grandchildren. I'm an active person. I coached little league and youth hockey. For several years, I volunteered my time and helped our community build a new recreation center. Currently, I'm a crew leader in the Americorps program at Camp Alberta. I like being able to do things for myself. But these days, when the lawn needs to be mowed or the snow needs to be shoveled, I can't do it. I just don't have the strength because my lungs are filled with asbestos fibers and they are scarred from years of exposure.

My doctor tells me that I only have two-thirds the lung capacity I used to have. My heart already has to work overtime to distribute oxygen through my body. I can't exert myself. I have to be very careful that I don't catch pneumonia or any lung condition -- because my lungs aren't able to fight off infections.

As I said, this isn't how I thought I'd be spending my retirement. I thought my wife and I would buy a motor home and travel out West. I pictured myself up in the mountains hunting deer. But today, even if I could afford it, my body wouldn't be able to take it. If I exert myself too much, I begin to feel a burning in my thighs. They're the largest muscles and the ones that become depleted of oxygen first.

This isn't how I thought I'd be spending my retirement, but when I think about the other guys I worked with -- I guess I came out lucky. Like my friend Dale Roberts. He was an electrician. We used to eat lunch together. He was so excited to retire. He was going to help his son run a portable saw mill. He was a healthy guy. He retired in 1992. Six months later, he was dead. The asbestos cancer wrecked his left lung. He went into the hospital, and a week later, he was dead. I'm also luckier than my friend Joe Brogan. Joe and I carpooled to work together. Joe retired, and I think it was two weeks later -- he too was dead of asbestosis. Senators, I could give you more names. In fact, when I finally took the mining company to court a few years ago, I brought with me a stack of a few hundred death certificates.

I didn't know about the dangers of asbestos. I didn't know the toll it was taking on my lungs and my life. I'm here today to tell you my story so that maybe someone else working in a mine -- or a brake shop -- or a factory -- won't lose the things I have lost; Won't those the things those men and their families have lost.

Because it takes 20 to 30 years for the scarring in the lungs to show up on an x-ray, many people aren't aware of the problem. Most Americans think asbestos is no longer a danger. But they're wrong. Today many types of asbestos and asbestos-like fibers are still used in manufacturing and are still ruining the health of workers like me. Companies will tell you asbestos is not a problem -- just like they told me. AGo back to work George. There's nothing to worry about, they said. Senators, they lied. We need to worry about asbestos -- and we need our government to protect us -- because businesses -- on their own -- won't always do the right thing.

As I mentioned, I started working for the Cleveland Cliff Iron Company in 1964. Over the years, I worked in three mines: the Humboldt, Republic and Tilden. I started as a hard rock driller. I drilled through the rock. Often that rock had veins of asbestos B a grey, flaky, smooth material. Sometimes you would be breathing the raw asbestos that you just drilled through. The dust would get all over you -- in your face -- in your mouth -- down your throat. You couldn't help it. There wasn't safety equipment. If you were lucky you'd come across a paper mask like this one. But even with a mask on, at the end of the day, you'd blow your nose and all this black dust would come out. Because my job didn't pay much, I worked overtime whenever I could and that exposed me to even more asbestos. Whether I was repairing the giant kilns or working in the crushers, I was often surrounded by clouds of white dust -- clouds of asbestos. Eventually, I became trained in electronics, and I worked in the mines and factories repairing equipment. Often, that equipment was wrapped in asbestos to insulate it from the heat. I brought some examples with me. Here is an asbestos gasket. And here is a piece of thermalcouple wire, which is covered in asbestos. I handled these throughout my job.

In 1987, the mining company had many of us x-rayed. My x-ray showed asbestos in my lungs, but the company doctor and a lung specialist told me not to worry about it. Around 1990, I went to see Dr. Michael Harbut. He told me the truth about my asbestosis, and he told me get out of the mine. I went back to the company with this information. I thought they'd put me on compensation. Instead they rejected his report and said -- your job is here, be at work tomorrow. And that was that. Later, I went to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota for several days of tests. I brought those results back with me to the mine. The personnel man laughed and pushed it away. He said, throw that in the basket because its just a bunch of garbage. Because of my disability, I retired at age 60. Today, I can't do the things I want to do for myself and my family.

Because it takes a long time for asbestosis to appear, in the coming months a lot of workers are going to diagnosed. I just wish the company would be more responsive to those workers and their families and not wait until those workers have died. I hope that this Committee will make sure that what happened to me won't happen to anyone else. Please raise the safety standards and keep a better eye on these companies. Help spread the word about the dangers of asbestos. Workers like me are counting on you to protect us. Please don't let us down. Thank you.